

ROLLING STONES

UNDER REVIEW 1975-1983

THE RONNIE WOOD YEARS (PART 1)

MVD ENTERTAINMENT



By the mid-70s the Rolling Stones were in trouble. Brian Jones, once their versatile instrumentalist, had committed suicide in 1969 after a drug addiction, and they had lost their guitarist Mick Taylor, who decided to resign from the group. Their backs seemed to be to the wall. However, they fought back by signing on Ronnie Wood (formerly with the Jeff Beck group and the Faces) who developed a close artistic and social relationship with Keith Richards, even though Richards was spiralling into severe drug addiction. It was Mick Jagger who held the group together, though he was still feuding with Richards. Jagger had the imagination of an entrepreneur, so despite his tendency to be a control freak—much to the resentment of Richards, in particular—he was able to incorporate new musical trends into the Stones's sound: funk, disco, and punk. Not every critic approved. The music world was changing: the Beatles were gone, to all intents and purposes; and Jimmie Hendrix and James Morison had succumbed to their drug excesses. Moreover, just being past 30 in age—as the Stones were—raised questions about endurance and relevance. The Stones, objected their critics, were merely following trends rather than setting their own.

This DVD of the so-called Ronnie Wood years (though there is far more of Jagger and Richards than Wood in evidence) is a compilation of interview and performance video clips. The critics (such as Anthony DeCurtis, Paul Gambaccini, Barney Hoskins, Robert Christgau, Mark Paytress, and Nigel Williamson) don't suffer from any reticence in their comments and verdicts, and though they sometimes contradict one another or pile on the criticism (in the case of *Black and Blue*, for instance, or *Tattoo You*), they are informative. They do make some passing remarks on Wood (that he wasn't a riff artist the way Richards was, but he felt instinctively that he was a Stone), but most of their focus is on the albums that the group produced during this period. What is particularly instructive is the sociological and political information because this helps place the Stones in context, while delving into the very sources and nature of their music at the time. The Stones were never a peace and love group, so when the U.S.A. (where they enjoyed some of their most successful tours) fell deeper into the morass of supporting South and Central American dictators who ran death squads, the Stones seemed to be irrelevant to the political ethos the time, though Jagger and his wife of the

time (Bianca) were very much part of the jet set and Studio 54—an altogether different ethos. Jagger's high society antics are not simply diversions because they suggest how the Big Apple influenced his music at the time. Jagger was a shrewd opportunist who had sensitive radar about new trends, so he invited Billy Preston and Ollie Brown to add their fresh rhythms to some numbers. He himself imitated James Brown in some of his dancing, and his rivalry with Davie Bowie propelled him into becoming musically eclectic. However, some critics felt that his musical guests were mere window-dressing to compensate for lacklustre tracks and albums. Others, especially punk musicians (such as Sid Vicious) took the new Stones as a mimic joke. They would go to the Stones concerts to guffaw at the blow-up penis that shot out confetti, or the lotus-shaped stage over which Jagger performed on a trapeze.

But the Stones dared mockery, and some of their output was, indeed, highly meritorious—as this DVD demonstrates through clips of “Miss You,” “Some Girls” (on which Sugar Blue played his exceptional harmonica), “Ya Gotta Walk” (with Peter Tosh in duet with Jagger), and “Start Me Up” (with Richards's most fabulous introduction in years). Reggae and hip-hop became part of the repertoire—not in any fulsome way, but in a modest one—and though the group was not immune to the charge of cynicism (trying to cash in on the new music), they were taking risks by the very act of eclecticism. Even though their 1973 album *Goat's Head Soup* was commercially and in many ways artistically successful, it didn't stop some of their critics from charging them with decadence. Purity in the arts is usually a fanciful ideal, and the Stones were not purists. So their most severe critics were wrong to judge them by standards that never apply in performance art, though they were right in seeing the group as nostalgia-driven when repeating their greatest hits from times gone by during new tours.

Technically, this DVD is far superior to many others—especially the dreadful Tina Turner one, where grainy and often indistinct documentary video marred the overall quality. The Rolling Stones and their colleagues are captured in fascinatingly sharp detail, and though I wish that some of the performance clips were longer and that other musicians contemporary with the Stones were included, along with more substantial extras, this is a DVD for the collector.

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